

## 9<sup>th</sup> – Forest Society and Colonialism I



Forests play a major role in enhancing the quality of environment. Forests provide us bamboo and wood for fuel, grass, charcoal, packaging, fruits, flowers, animals, birds and many other things. In spite of being an important resource, the forests are disappearing at a fast rate. Between 1700 to 1995, the period of industrialization, 13.9 million sq km of forests or 9.3% of the world's total area was cleared for industrial uses, cultivation, pastures and fuel wood.

**Deforestation:** The disappearance of forests is referred to as deforestation. The process of deforestation began many centuries ago in India. Under colonial rule it became more systematic and extensive. Some of the causes of deforestation are given below

**To Increase the Land for Cultivation:** As the population increased with time, the need for food increased. Thus, peasants increased the cultivation by clearing forests. In colonial period, British encouraged the production of crops like jute, sugar, wheat and cotton. These crops are required to feed the growing urban population of Europe and for raw material needed for industrial production. Colonial Government also thought that forests were unproductive. Between 1880 and 1920 forest disappeared to a great extent and cultivation area rose by 6.7 million hectares.

**To Supply the Timber for Royal Navy:** In 19th century, due to disappearance of oak trees in England, there was a problem of timber supply for the Royal Navy. Ships of Royal Navy could not be built without a regular supply of strong and durable timber. To maintain the timber supply for Royal Navy, search parties were sent to explore the forest resources of India. Lot of trees in India were cut within a decade and huge quantity of timber was exported to England.

**To Expand Railway Network:** From 1850s, the railway network expanded rapidly. Wood was needed as a fuel to run rail engines (locomotives) and wooden sleepers were required to hold the track together. The government gave out contracts to individuals to supply the required quantities of timber. These contractors began cutting trees indiscriminately. Forest around the railway tracks started disappearing at fast rate.

**To Enclose Areas for Plantations:** Large areas of natural forests were also cleared to set up tea, coffee and rubber plantations to meet Europe's growing need for these commodities. The Colonial Government took over the forests and gave vast areas to European planters at cheap rates. The planters enclosed these areas, cleared forests and planted it with tea and coffee.

**The Rise of Commercial Forestry:** The British government was worried about the use of forests by local people and felling of trees by the contractors carelessly. These activities destroyed the forests rapidly. So, the British Government appointed a German expert, Dietrich Brandis as the first Inspector-General of Forests in India. He realized that a proper system had to be introduced to manage the forests and people had to be trained in the science of conservation. Rules about the use of forest resources had to be framed. Felling of trees and grazing had to be restricted, so that forests could be preserved for timber production. Anybody who cut trees without following the system had to be punished. All these efforts of Brandis, gave rise to Indian Forest Act, 1865,

**Indian Forest Act, 1865:** Dietrich Brandis set up the Indian Forest Service in 1864 and helped formulate the Indian Forest Act of 1865. The Imperial Forest Research Institute was set up at Dehradun in 1906. It was first forestry school to be inaugurated in British Empire. The system they taught here was called Scientific Forestry. In scientific forestry, natural forests which had lots of different types of trees were cut down and in their place, one type of trees was planted in straight rows. This is known as plantation. For example, cultivation of poplar trees which are good for timber. Forest officials surveyed the forests and made working plans for forest management. They planned how much of the plantation area is to be





cut every year. The cleared area was then to be replanted so that it would be ready to cut again in some years. The Forest Act of 1865, was amended twice, once in 1878 and then in 1927. These were the forests which produced commercially valuable timber. No Pastoralist was allowed access to these forests. The Indian Forest Act, 1878, divided forest into three categories, viz reserved, protected and village forests. The best forests were called Reserved Forests.

**Effect of Forest Act on Lives of People:** The forest Act meant extreme hardship for and forest people across the country. Villagers could not take anything from these forests for their own use. For house building or fuel, they could take wood from protected or village forests.

Villagers wanted forests to satisfy different needs like fuel, fodder, leaves, etc. The Forest department wanted trees for building ships and for these purposes; they needed particular species like teak and sal. So these species were promoted and other species of trees had been cut down. After the Forest Act, cutting wood for homes, collection of fuel wood, grazing the cattles, collecting fruits and roots, hunting and fishing all became illegal. Forest guards take the bribes from the people if they were caught while stealing wood from forest.

**Products from forests:** In forest areas, people use many forest products as food or as medicine. They used roots, leaves, fruits, tubers etc for many things. Fruits and tubers are nutritious to eat, especially during the monsoons before the harvest has come in. Herbs are used for medicine, wood for agricultural Implements like yokes and ploughs, bamboo make baskets and umbrellas. A dried scooped-out gourd can be used as a portable water bottle.

Almost everything is available in the forest. Leaves can be stitched together to make disposable plates and cups, the siadi (*Bauhinia vahlii*) creeper can be used to make ropes and the. Thorny bark of the semur (silk-cotton) tree is used to grate vegetables. Cooking and to light lamps can be pressed from the fruit of the mahua (*Madhuca indica*) tree. Mahua flowers can be eaten or used to make alcohol.

**Effect of Forest Rules on Cultivation:** The major impact of forest laws was the ban on shifting cultivation or swidden agriculture. In shifting cultivation, parts of the forest are cut and burnt in rotation. Seeds are sown in ashes after the first monsoon rain and the crops are harvested by October-November. Such plots are cultivated for a couple of years and then left fallow for 12 to 18 years for the forest to grow back. A mixture of crops is grown on these plots.

### Learning With Innovation.....

**Note** The shifting cultivation has many local names, like lading in South East Asia, milpa in Central America, chitemene or Tavy in Africa, chena in Sri Lanka. In India also it has many local names like, dhya, penda, bewar, nevad, jhum, podh, khandad, Kumri, etc.

**Banning of Shifting Cultivation:** European foresters regarded the practice of shifting cultivation was harmful for the forests. When a forest was burnt there was a danger of spreading flames and burning valuable timbers. Shifting cultivation made it more difficult for the government to calculate taxes. So, the British Government decided to ban shifting cultivation. As a result, some communities were forcibly displaced from their homes. Some of them had to change their occupations, while some revolted against the law.

**Taungya Cultivation:** - It was a system in which local farmers were allowed to cultivate temporarily within a plantation. When the cultivators were sowing paddy, the men made holes in the soil using long bamboo poles with iron tips. The women sowed paddy in each hole.

**Prohibition on Hunting after Forest Act:** Before the forest laws, many people who lived in or near forests had survived by hunting deer, partridges and a variety of small animals. This practice of hunting was prohibited by the new forest law. Those who were caught hunting were punished. This illegal hunting was termed as poaching by colonisers. The forest law

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deprived the forest dwellers of their customary rights to hunt. Under colonial rule, the scale of hunting increased largely and as a result many animals became almost extinct. The Britishers saw large animals as sign of wild, primitive and savage society. They believed that by killing dangerous animals they would civilise India. They gave rewards for the killings of tigers, wolves and other large animals so that there, would be no threat to cultivators.

Initially, certain areas of forests were conserved for hunting. Later, environmentalists and conservators begin to argue that all these species of animals needed to be protected and not killed.

**New Trades, New Employments and New Services:** Due to control of forest department on forests, people suffered in many ways but some people benefitted from the new opportunities that had opened up in trade. This happened not only in India but in the whole world. For example, due to growing demand of rubber, Mundurucu people of Brazilian Amazon began to collect latex from wild rubber trees for supplying to traders.

In India, trade in forest product was a regular practice from medieval periods onwards. After the arrival of Britishers, the trade for forest products was completely regulated. British government gave sole right to large European trading firms to trade in forest products of particular areas. In this process, many pastoralist and nomadic communities of Madras Presidency like the Korava, Karacha and Yerukula lost their livelihoods. Some of them began to be called **Criminal Tribes** and were forced to work in factories, mines and plantations under government supervision.

**Low Wages and Bad Working Conditions:** New opportunities in trade of forest products did not improve the life of the people. Forest communities like Santhals, Oraons (Jharkhand) and Gonds (Chhattisgarh) were recruited to work on tea plantations in Assam, Their wages were low and working conditions were very bad. Also, they could not return to their home villages easily from where they had been recruited.

**Rebellion in the Forest:** - In many parts of India and across the world, forest communities rebelled against the changes that were being imposed on them. In India, Siddhu and Kanu of Santhal Paraganas, Birsa Munda of Chhotanagpur, Alluri Sitarama Raju of Andhra Pradesh who revolted against the new forest policy are still remembered today in many songs and stories.

